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ARTICLE III.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF FORGIVENESS.

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THERE is a wide difference between that course of conduct which is prescribed in the law of God, and that which is pursued by the majority of mankind. In the many disturbances and contentions which take place among men, and which are so productive of misery and crime, the great point which each party tries to establish is, that the other is in the wrong—that they have been injured; and if this point is once established in their own mind, they regard it as sanctioning vindictive feelings. Let them believe that they are in the right, and they persuade themselves that they are perfectly justifiable in retaliating upon the aggressor. But this, plainly, can be done only by violating that rule of the law of God which requires us *to overcome evil with good*. The party, in his own belief, stands precisely on the ground on which this rule supposes him to stand. It admits that wrong has been done. It addresses itself to the party who has suffered it. It says, be not overcome by that wrong—that is, yield not to feelings of anger or vengeance—let not unkindness from others awaken unkind feelings in your own mind towards them—return not insult with insult, injury with injury. Pursue an entirely opposite course—return friendly services for unkindness—blessings for insults—and beneficence for injury. It is by no means inconsistent with the spirit of the rule that we should feel disapprobation of the evil. The rule simply prescribes the course to be pursued towards those who are guilty of the evil. Great compassion and kindness towards a drunkard, for example, are by no means incompatible with entire disapprobation. Neither is disapprobation of the conduct of those who do us wrong, incompatible with kindness towards them. On the contrary, it

is this very disapprobation which is to awaken our benevolent feelings, and to induce us to adopt that course which is best calculated to produce a reformation in those who have done the wrong. *Overcome evil with good.* How noble is this rule ! How different from the language of this world ! How much more exalted than any thing which mere philosophy ever taught !

It shall be my object to show, in the present article, that this rule is the rule of the only true philosophy.

I. Because *it is best adapted to the constitution of man.* As a general principle, if you wish to know what will be the effect of a certain course of conduct on others, you have only to turn your attention inward on yourself, and inquire, What would be its effect on me ? You are aware that the natural effect of anger towards you in others, is to excite anger in yourself—of kindness to excite feelings of kindness. It seems to be a universal law of nature, that like should produce its like. The herb yields seed, and the fruit tree fruit, each after its kind. On the regularity and certainty of this law, in its operation, the husbandman relies with confidence. If wheat might not yield wheat, and corn might not yield corn, what confusion and perplexity would arise in agriculture, if indeed agriculture could exist at all ! Something like the same law prevails in regard to many diseases to which the human body is subject. Fever flies from one individual to another, and is, in kind, the same disease. The same law prevails in the intellectual and moral world. This is taken for granted in all that is said about the force of example. It is upon this principle, also, that we account for the power of sympathy. The natural tendency of mirth is to awaken mirth—and of grief to produce grief. So also of the benevolent and the malignant passions. Does not unkindness towards you from others, excite unkind feelings in your own mind, towards them ?

Therefore, as a necessary consequence of this law, by retaliation, or returning evil for evil, you are only adding fuel to the flame. It was doubtless some unkindness on your part, either real or imagined, which in the first place excited the hostile

feelings. By increasing that unkindness, or by making it real, do you expect to remove the hostile feelings? You might as well think of removing some infection from an individual, by pouring into his lungs the deadly miasma. You might as well sow thistles in a garden where thistles were already beginning to grow, and expect to see spring up in their stead, a bed of roses. You might as well laugh, and expect to make others weep, or weep, and expect to make others laugh.

There is then a two-fold wrong in returning evil for evil. You are cherishing the same angry feelings in your own mind which you condemn in others; and in the minds of others you are increasing and perpetuating the same feelings.—*As coals are to burning coals, and as wood to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife.*

Now, on the other hand, is it not equally true that the natural tendency of kindness from others is to awaken kind feelings in your mind towards them? When you injure an individual, and he, instead of retaliating, generously forgives you, and resisting the dictate of his fallen nature, pursues the more elevated course prescribed by our rule, embracing every opportunity to do you a kindness, does it not soften and subdue your soul? Do you not begin to accuse yourself of having done wrong, and feel disposed to make amends for the past, and to act differently in future? Here, then, you may see how similar conduct on your part will affect the mind of another. *As in water, face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man.* Thus, according to the laws of our nature, reason alone must convince you, you can overcome evil only by returning good. You yourself, in the spirit of the Christian religion, must rise above the first impulse of your depraved nature, and ever aiming to do good, pursue the course prescribed by this Christian rule. Thus you will adapt yourself to a law of our nature, which, if otherwise treated, would produce opposite results.

Nor is the argument derived from the effect which the malignant passions exert upon the physical health, without weight. In this respect, also, our rule is suited to the nature of

man. The evil effects of an intemperate indulgence of the passions of appetite are so many beacons which the Maker of our bodies has erected to warn us of danger. So also of the malignant and angry passions. Is it not universally admitted, that a peaceful disposition is conducive to health, and on the contrary, an irascible disposition injurious to it? Hence the care of skilful physicians, in critical cases, to have the minds of their patients kept in peace and tranquillity.

We may derive further argument to our purpose from the fact, that the course of conduct prescribed by our rule is attended by what does not attend an opposite course—an approving conscience. He who returns kindness for injury—who fills with benefit the very hand that would do him hurt, feels that he is acting an elevated and magnanimous part. In the gentleness of his own mind there is an inward peace—in the very benevolence of his intention there is a happiness, pure and substantial. There is a voice speaking within his heart which nothing can silence, and it tells him that he is doing right. Compare this spirit with its opposite, and tell me who is the enviable man—he, who, fretting and raging at the injuries which he has received, would hurl back destruction upon the aggressor—or he, who, calming down every rising passion, keeps his spirit in subjection, and looking with benevolence upon one who has wronged him, seeks to overcome evil with good? Which is attended with real pleasure, the spirit of resentment and retaliation, or that of forgiveness and benevolence? While the one, like the deep fires of a volcano, burns and rages within, does not the other inspire a sweet serenity which delights the soul?

Yonder is an individual who has been injured. He is devising a way by which he can retaliate—his mind is indulging resentment, and by some return of evil, he is seeking satisfaction. There, again, is another to whom an equal injury has been done, but he, in the spirit of forgiveness and benevolence, is meditating how he can benefit the man who has injured him? Suppose that they each gain their respective ends—which, in the moment of success, is more to be envied? I will not point

you to the haggard countenance and the tortured heart of the murderer—I will not point you to the victorious duellist as he bends over his bleeding antagonist, and bid you think of the cheerless days and sleepless nights which are to follow—nor yet to him who, by some overwhelming infliction, has laid his victim in the dust, and doomed him to a life of poverty. In these cases, the misery of the success is too apparent to need comment. But observe him who has returned an injury by some slight insinuation—some whisper of detraction—some more trifling and common retaliation—see him looking upon the object of his resentment, and feeling that he has triumphed—that he has tarnished his reputation and blasted his hopes—and tell me if you think the peace of heaven attends his success. On the other hand, observe him who, by returning kindness, has softened and overcome the aggressor, and from an enemy, made him a friend. Does he not, think you, enjoy a peace of soul—an inward delight, to which the other is a stranger?—From these considerations, then, it is evident that the rule which requires us to overcome evil with good, is adapted to the constitution of man.

II. The rule of the Christian philosophy *is also best adapted to man's character and condition.* The truth of this position must be admitted, if we regard man in any of the three following aspects:—1st. *As a social being* ; 2d. *As a sinful being*; 3d. *As a dying, yet accountable and immortal being.*

1st. *As a social being* ;

If we consider the relations which, from his infancy, man sustains, it will appear evident that it is the design of the Creator that he should cultivate the kindly affections. Life begins with the tender relations of parents and children, and brothers and sisters—relations eminently calculated to call forth kindness and sympathy. The earliest feeling awakened in the heart of the infant, seems to be that of love. Its first act of intelligence is to recognize its mother with a smile. The mother's kindness soon leads the child to select her from all others, and throwing around her its little arms, to cling to her as the

object of its affection and confidence. From this early period, the child grows up in the bosom of a family where the tender affections are daily cultivated, and extended to other objects, until parents, and brothers, and sisters, and perhaps grand-parents, are included in the circle of its love. Now what is this but an evident preparation for after-years? These relations are designed to give character to the child, and to fit it for the still larger circles of life—and to teach it to regard all men as members of the same family, where sympathy, and love, and beneficence, may find new objects, and more enlarged exercise. To entertain affections other than kindly, is then contrary to the first lessons instilled into our minds.

Further, our rule is suited to man as a social being, because he is hereby called to cherish and exhibit those affections towards others which he daily needs that they should cherish and exhibit towards himself. Were we ourselves wholly free from the same condemnation in which we include evil doers, we might, with propriety, assume the office of a judge, and administer punishment to those who wrong us. But where is the man living who is not conscious of having, at some time of his life—in some way—injured a fellow man? Search the whole human family—and find, if you can, one who, neither by thought—nor word—nor act—has injured another. Surely, then, the recollection of our own faults should make us forgiving and benevolent when injured by others. For by condemning others, we condemn ourselves.

2d. *As a sinful being ;*

Who is this that would return evil for evil? Is he not a sinner? Has he not in a variety of ways, and under the most aggravated circumstances, returned evil for good to the very God who made him and sustains him? Is he not living on the mercy and forbearance of that God? Is he not daily indebted for all his enjoyments to a disposition in his Maker, directly the reverse of his own? Is not God himself seeking to overcome evil with good—sending his rain upon the just and the unjust? Is it not owing to His forbearance that the sword of justice still slumbers in its sheath—that the sun shines bright

upon the sinner's path—the earth looks fair to him—and the flowers bloom sweetly? Especially, what but the love of the God whom he is daily offending, warns him, and pleads with him, and points him to a Saviour's blood? Is it, then, for man—sinful man—to return evil for evil to his fellow man?

3d. *As a dying, yet accountable, and immortal being;* The heart that is now swelling with anger, will soon be in the dust. The lips that are now uttering imprecations and resentments, will soon be sealed in death. Shall he indulge feelings of resentment whose body is hastening to the grave, and whose soul to the bar of his Judge? How shall he hope for forgiveness who now feels none himself? Let him call to remembrance the parable of the servant who, indebted to his lord ten thousand talents, and forgiven all that debt, laid hands on his fellow servant, for an hundred pence, and cast him into prison. "O, thou wicked servant," said his lord, "I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me—shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow servant, even as I had pity on thee?" And then his lord cast him also into prison, until he should pay the debt. "So will also your heavenly Father do unto you, if ye, from your hearts, forgive not every one his brother their trespasses."

III. The rule of the Christian philosophy *points out the only way by which a real and permanent victory over evil can be secured.* We have seen that it is only by kindness that you can awaken kindness. By resentment and retaliation, you only call forth a repetition of the evil, and perhaps increased in bitterness. If you continue to act on the same principle, the evil must be again returned, and again received, with the increase, till at length it must result in some appalling outrage. Trifling injuries have often ended in scenes of blood—slight resentment has grown into hatred—and hatred into burning rage! But by returning kindness for injury, you subdue the heart. This is a real victory. You may, if you have superior power, bring the body into subjection, but the mind remains unvanquished. You may load an enemy with chains, but he is

your enemy still—you may immure him in a dungeon—but even there his heart is meditating revenge. You may, by authority or force, compel one who has injured you to repair the wrong, or to suffer for it—but does this make him your friend? No—had he power and opportunity, he would repeat the evil. But follow the course prescribed by our rule—you subdue the heart, gain a conquest over the whole man, convert an enemy into a friend. You may now, without fear, place your reputation in his hands—he will defend it; you may lie down and slumber at his feet—he will protect you. And this victory will be permanent. It has been gained, not by physical power, but by a power which has entered the soul, and brought out upon your side the nobler feelings of its nature.

Finally, *how truly noble is the nature of the contest here proposed!* “Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.” To rise above the impulses of a fallen nature—to conquer the evil passions, first in our own breasts and then in those of others, is indeed a victory. It is implied by the rule, that the contest is at first *defensive*—*be not overcome of evil*—repel aggression, by preserving a tranquil and benevolent mind, and soon its force will become exhausted. And then act upon the *offensive*—*overcome evil with good*—heaping benefits upon the aggressor—and you subdue his heart, win his love, and render it impossible for him to do you injury. What a sublime triumph! But the victory does not stop here. You learn to live and act as a spiritual and immortal being. You feel that it is not in the power of others to injure you—you only can injure yourself. You cover yourself with a panoply impenetrable. And then the voice of conscience assures you that you are at peace with Him who alone has power to hurt and to destroy. *If our hearts condemn us not, then have we peace with God.* Besides, all heaven regards you as a victor, and in heaven you shall find your victory acknowledged and complete.